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ABSTRACT

Rather than relegating Aristotle's "Rhetoric" to history of rhetoric courses, where it is regarded with only an antiquarian interest, it can be used as a practical text for introductory public speaking courses. The advantages would be threefold: (1) its emphasis is essentially on rhetoric as a speaking art rather than an art of composition; (2) it explains the what, why, and how of persuasion rather than simply the how as contemporary technical manuals tend to do; and (3) it reinvests the teaching of public speaking with the seriousness accorded it in ancient, medieval, and renaissance universities, thus countering the attitude common among today's undergraduates that the public speaking course is an easy "A." Three translations of the work are currently in print, only one in paperback, that of Lane Cooper. The least expensive and most accurate translation is the Loeb edition from Harvard University Press, with the Greek appearing on the pages facing the English. Although the "Rhetoric" lacks the contemporary examples that are the selling point of many new texts, the teacher can successfully explain and defend the relevancy of the examples without allowing the Greek names to discourage the students. In addition, by pointing out that Aristotle's sureness is not rigidity but rather is the result of the purpose of his rhetoric, which is to appeal to a political group, teachers can make students aware of the transfer of values from text to contemporary life. Student evaluation of the course that used the "Rhetoric" has been positive. (CRH)

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Teaching Public Speaking Using Aristotle's Rhetoric

RATIONALE

It has been said of Aristotle's Rhetoric that it was the beginning and end of a discipline. Yet with all the respect accorded to the first full treatise in our field, the Rhetoric is used primarily in history of rhetoric courses, often with only an antiquarian interest. This paper proposes a different use for the Rhetoric of Aristotle--as a practical teaching text for introductory public speaking courses. Its advantages are threefold: 1) its emphasis is essentially on rhetoric as a speaking art rather than an art of composition; 2) it explains the what, why, and how of persuasion rather than simply the how as contemporary technical manuals tend to do; 3) it reinvests the teaching of public speaking with the seriousness accorded it in ancient, medieval, and renaissance universities, in lieu of a common attitude among today's undergraduates that the public speaking course is an easy A.

The first point is important in terms of a justification for departments of speech and communication, particularly during tight economic situations as those at universities today. If the typical public speaking course duplicates in large part what is being taught in English departments, we have less reason to receive university and government funding. A glance at most contemporary public speaking texts shows a section on writing similar to those found in English composition texts: finding material, topic

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selection, definitions of words, library research, organization of the speech, diction.

Aristotle does not neglect those aspects of good writing which in turn make for good speeches, but he takes them up in Book III, after first presenting in Books I and II what characterizes rhetoric as a separate discipline. His sections on style, clarity, organization, and delivery contain principles that have hardly changed over twenty-four hundred years. For example, in Book III.14, Aristotle gives the functions of the Introduction which may be found in any rhetoric or composition text today. He makes the following remarks: "This, then, is the superlative function of the proem...: to make clear the end and object of your work." He tells the orator to secure the goodwill of the hearer, engage his attention or even make him laugh. Concerning clarity, Aristotle states (III.11): "a good style is, first of all clear. The proof is that language which does not convey a clear meaning fails to perform the very function of language. The style, again, should be neither mean nor above the dignity of the subject, but appropriate; the poetical style, say, is not mean, but it is unsuited to prose. Clearness is secured through the use of name-words (nouns and adjectives) and verbs that are current terms....(D)eviations from ordinary usage make the style more impressive." This advice about writing still holds today.

However, while Aristotle provides the same advice on the techniques of writing and delivering speeches (the "how," of contemporary texts), before he offers this advice, he explains what rhetoric

is and why it is important in a democracy. Aristotle begins by defining rhetoric as the power of discovering in the particular case the available means of persuasion, a statement I am sure we all remember. Because good definitions, as Aristotle himself has taught us, begin with genus and then proceed to species, telling us what our subject is like and what it is unlike, Aristotle contrasts rhetoric with dialectic and with logic, and then tells us its three species: deliberative, forensic, and epideictic. He tells us what is wrong with previous handbooks of rhetoric: they ignore the enthymeme. We are provided with the "what is" of rhetoric.

Why do we need rhetoric? To persuade, of course. But why is it good to persuade an audience? The highest justification is found in Aristotle's Rhetoric. He does not teach us how to succeed in business (without really trying?) but how to counsel the state well in order to preserve it (deliberative), to show the audience what is noble and virtuous (epideictic), and to accuse wrong-doers and defend the innocent (forensic). In order to best accomplish these ends, Aristotle offers a section on the forms of government: democracy, oligarchy, aristocracy, and monarchy. He says, "It is quite necessary to observe the end or aim of each form, for the citizens make their choices with reference to the end. The end of democracy is freedom, of oligarchy, wealth, of aristocracy, the promotion of discipline and the institutions of the state, of tyranny, self-protection" (I.8). If the citizens aim at freedom, for example, the orator must make a speech prais-

ing freedom, or his hearers will not be persuaded. A rationale for rhetoric which looks to the highest aims of citizenship and government is important in teaching young men and women, no matter what the subject.

This emphasis upon noble ends is a worthy introduction to the third rationale for teaching Aristotle's Rhetoric: the seriousness of the text and therefore the assignments, as well as, for the most part, the speeches presented by the class members. Aristotle, as we can probably recall, is not an easy author to read. He does not use informal language, he often requires dictionary use, and concentration is essential when studying his text. Most contemporary writers of public speaking books try to eliminate these inconveniences in an attempt to make the text "relevant." Unfortunately, however, the more trendy the text, the more quickly it is outdated. Many fine authors in the communication field have written public speaking textbooks which seem to me to have been discontinued solely on the ground that both the writing style and examples chosen have gone out of vogue. An ancient writer is perhaps no longer subject to these vagaries of contemporary fashion. When the student purchases a copy of Aristotle's Rhetoric, it can be kept a lifetime; its wisdom grows with the student's own maturity.

OBJECTIVES

The primary objective in the use of Aristotle's Rhetoric is to understand persuasion, both in order to use such skill in an active sense and to understand what is really being said when

listening to or reading the speeches of others. The goal is to replace a rather loose way of learning-by-doing, which is the typical method of public speaking courses as taught today, with a more scientific procedure of understanding the theory first. Thus theory and practice are integrated in that way suggested by Aristotle himself in the first paragraph of the Rhetoric. He says there that public speaking is "in a way, within the realm of common knowledge....Most people do so, of course, either at random, or else merely with a knack acquired from practice. Success in either way being possible, the random impulse and the acquired facility alike evince the feasibility of reducing the process to a method; for when the practiced and the spontaneous speaker gain their end, it is possible to investigate the cause of their success; and such an inquiry, we shall all admit, performs the function of an art." This course's first objective, then, is to examine how and why rhetoric succeeds; the goal is to emphasize knowledge of the art of rhetoric rather than to reward students possessing a knack for effective speaking but without genuine understanding.

Under this larger objective are three specific objectives which, taken together, help the student to understand persuasion. The first is to understand the goods and virtues which Aristotle says we all value. This understanding is necessary for making persuasive speeches, since the orator must appeal to what the hearers value. But there is a larger goal attending this aspect of the course: the exploration of values, morality, and myths within our own democracy. A second specific objective is to

understand human passions, both in order to move such passions by way of the students' own speeches and to provide a better understanding of our own psychology. When and why do we experience fear, shame, envy, pity, anger? These are important questions to a student of college age who is often undergoing a period of self-analysis.

The third and final objective, and in some ways the most important, is to improve the reasoning ability of students in their ordinary thinking and speaking. The emphasis here is not upon logic, which is useful only to a specific context, but upon the actual arguments which we all confront and employ in our everyday life and which sound plausible to us whether in the mass media or in ordinary conversation.

COURSE OUTLINE*

I. Definition of Rhetoric (Read I.1-4)

   A. Assignment: Write a definition of rhetoric, carefully examining all references in Chs. 1 and 2.
   B. Assignment: Write a definition of art, using all references in Chs. 1 and 2.

II. Goods and Virtues (Read I.5-12)

   A. Assignment: Write Aristotle's definition of the goods and virtues. Define the noble and base, list the goods.
   B. SPEECH #1: Give a speech appealing to the audience's desire for one of the goods (e.g., health, beauty, power, etc.).
   C. SPEECH #2: Give a speech of praise or blame.

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* Each subheading (A, B, C) is planned for a single two-hour class discussion.

COURSE OUTLINE (cont.)

III. Passions (Read II.1-18)

A. Assignment: List and define the passions and their opposites.
B. SPEECH #3: Give a speech arousing a selected passion.

IV. Argument (Read II.19-26)

A. Assignment: Using the index, give all the definitions of the enthymeme in the entire book.
B. SPEECH #4: Give a speech arguing from probability.
C. SPEECH #5: Give a speech arguing from example.

MATERIALS

There are three translations of Aristotle's Rhetoric currently in print, and but one in paperback edition, that of Lane Cooper. Quotations in this paper are taken from Cooper's text. Unfortunately this translation presents four difficulties for the student: 1) Cooper inserts his own remarks, usually interpretive, into the text directly instead of by way of footnotes. He does use brackets to separate his comments from Aristotle's, but it takes a practiced eye to distinguish the two while reading. I have repeatedly urged students to ignore this bracketed material, but the text format makes it difficult for them to do so; 2) Cooper's translation proves inaccurate at times when compared with the Greek original; 3) his style is strained and difficult for most students to handle; and 4) it has become quite expensive, $14.95 (paperbound).

In terms of readability and style, the better translation is by W. Rhys Roberts, but here too expense is a problem.* His translation of Books I and II only is also available in the Random

* I have just received a review copy of Roberts' translation in paper: The Rhetoric and Poetics of Aristotle, Intro by Edward P.J. Corbett, New York: Modern Library, 1984.

House Aristotle (ed. Richard McKeon), but the price is $24.95. Some students, however, have told me that they would rather pay the extra $10.00 and own an anthology of Aristotle's works than pay $15.00 for the Cooper paperback. This is an important consideration, particularly for students just beginning their college education; it may save them money in the long run, and it certainly gives them a lot to read. While Book III of the Rhetoric is wanting in the McKeon edition, the course outlined above omits Book III both because of time limitations and because of the difficulty in translating Greek commentary on figures of speech and rhythm.

The least expensive and more accurate translation is the Loeb edition (Harvard University Press) selling for $12.50. Freese's translation presents stylistic difficulties; it is sometimes slow-going and awkward. The Greek appearing on pages facing the English will be useless to most students, although, since it is not integrated into the English text, it offers no difficulties for those who choose to ignore it. Some students enjoy looking at it and even begin to recognize a few key Greek words. I plan to use this translation the next time I teach this course and will be interested in student evaluations of the text.

EVALUATION

I have twice taught a public speaking course using Aristotle's Rhetoric, once to Northwestern University undergraduates and once to adults in Northwestern's Division of Continuing Education.

I designed this course subsequent to having taught public speaking three times to undergraduates using a contemporary text and methods. The earlier courses had the typical assignments: introductory speech, audience analysis, information speech, persuasive speech, entertainment speech, opinion speech, etc. I found that the students and I were often frustrated by a lack of theory, definition, distinction, and analysis. Students who were good performers or actors tended to be successful entertainers, while shyer students struggled. When I asked myself at the end of each term "What did they learn?" I felt that the students benefitted most through practice. Performance anxiety, for those few who had it, gradually disappeared simply by virtue of experience. How much better, I thought, would be a course which preceded actual practice with a theoretical study.

The question which educators raise about the use of Aristotle's Rhetoric for a public speaking course is the major contemporary question in education today: relevance. Is what Aristotle had to say twenty-five hundred years ago relevant to students in the 1980's, given that Aristotle was a wealthy aristocrat in a closed society, while we are democrats (alack! not wealthy) in a mass society? The selling point of the newest textbooks on public speaking is frequently the contemporaneity of its examples. The sample arguments for Aristotle's topics (II.18-24) are taken from law cases, speeches, and writings of fifth-century Greece.

The following difficulty was expressed by a student in my continuing education class, a man who, because of his interest

in business and politics, was taking the course with practical purposes in mind. He arrived in class after having read the assignment concerning argument saying, "These Topics are impossible; you'd have to know Greek to understand them." I asked him to select one and read it for the class in order to point out his difficulty. He chose the topic of induction (Topic 10). Aristotle offers as an example of induction the principle that "women everywhere can settle questions touching the legitimacy of children." As induction proceeds from specific instances to a general proposition, the rhetorician must use examples of well-known instances in which the mother established the legitimacy of the child. Aristotle offers three such examples: the first from a play, Woman of Peparethus, the second from an Athenian law case between an orator, Mantias, and his son, and the third from a Theban lawcourt. I pointed out to my student that while the names of the participants in these cases were Greek, the principle could clearly be understood and, moreover, such a principle is equally relevant today. In a legal suit questioning the patrimony of a child, the mother would still be the most credible witness. She ought to know. And the lawyer would still appeal to precedent--other more famous cases in which the mother's testimony prevailed. Yet, because these are rhetorical arguments, there remains two sides to this issue. One might argue that a woman, if she has more than one sexual partner, may not know the patrimony of her child. In this case too, the lawyer would argue using the topic of induction by pointing out instances in which a mother was an unreliable witness as to her child's legitimacy.

As this example shows, the task of the instructor teaching public speaking from Aristotle's Rhetoric is to bring forth the relevancy of Aristotle's examples without allowing Greek names to discourage the students.

A second difficulty in using the Rhetoric is that some students may resent Aristotle's sureness, calling him and the instructor rigid and dogmatic. "How does he know everything?" is a question which does arise. A section from Aristotle's discussion of the goods will suffice to illustrate. When Aristotle tells us what the goods are, he states what "all men believe." He does not say that his writings are just a matter of his own opinion, nor in this case does he give contradictory views equal sway. Further, he does not use research studies to prove his case; his notion of empirical is learning from experience or observation of human nature. He makes such statements as "Both individually and collectively, we may say, men all have some object at which they aim in whatever they choose and whatever they avoid. This object may be summarily described as Happiness.... The parts of happiness must be good birth, the possession of many friends, the possession of good friends, wealth, the posession of good children, the possession of many children, a happy old age; further such physical excellences as health, beauty, strength, stature, and athletic ability; also fame, honor, good luck, and virtue" (I.5).

Aristotle's approach is quite different in this regard from a contemporary public speaking text, where opinions are carefully

stated on both sides of an issue, often with research examples supporting each position. What is important for students to understand about Aristotle's approach is that everything in the Rhetoric helps to show what rhetoric is. That is to say that the statements about the goods, or what everyone values, are those values held by a political group, and it is to those values the rhetorician must appeal in order to persuade. There are of course certain individuals who do not value wealth or good looks or friends or political power, but for the most part, appeals to these goods tend to succeed with a group. A question raised by a student in the continuing education class exhibits a typical response to Aristotle. A twenty-year-old black woman asked, "What do these goods have to do with me? Aristotle was a rich white man living twenty centuries ago. How could he know what people like me think and feel?" This was my response: "Don't your friends and neighbors value friendship, good looks, wealth, good children, health, physical strength, and power?" Laughingly, she had to admit that life had not changed all that much.

Judging from student evaluations, the course has been quite successful with both undergraduate and adult programs. I did encourage students who desired a course on "How to Succeed in Business," that is, a course that lays out a series of easy-to-follow steps in the technical aspects of speaking, to enroll in a different section. One or two took this advice the first week, especially after I explained that my course would entail more

work and stricter evaluation than some others. I also explained that the content of a speech was primary; if the orator does not know how to persuade an audience, technical aids such as note cards or audio-visual material will not be of much help. After the course was over, one or two students in each class still maintained that Aristotle and I were rigid, but most were excited that they were asked to think and that they had actually read and understood a classical philosopher.